k Dickson G-S (1929-47) 1951 MI 1 Kuwait MI
Bedouins M24

Accompaniments of Rain

Chap. XX

THE RAINS

The rains may arrive any time between the 1st October and 3rd November, and usually set in with a series of thunderstorms. Great and wild is the rejoicing when Kuwait first perceives, borne strongly on the breeze, the smell of the first rain on parched-up sand. I have described in Chapter III the scene of excitement when men, women and children rush out into the rain and collect the precious water into every possible utensil. Camels groan extra loud to testify their pleasure, and sheep set up a pandemonium of baa-ing. The city folk, normally dependent for their water on the Shatt al 'Arab, 100 miles away, act like their Badawin brethren, and endeavour to catch into every form of utensil the water running off their house-tops.

An annual visitor now makes its appearance in the desert. This is the *bint al mutar* (Daughter of Rain), a small plump-bodied spider, brilliantly scarlet in colour and with a body like velvet. It appears apparently from nowhere as soon as the first rain has wet the ground.

The next arrivals in Kuwait are old Badawin men bearing sprigs of green grass which they have brought to show their beloved Shaikh, with congratulations such as, "*ya tawal al 'umr* (O thou with long life) God has given good rain at So-and-So, there has been *sail* (the expression used to convey that water-channels have flowed), and so many hand-widths of rain have fallen (meaning the depth into the soil which the rain has penetrated), we come to show you the green grass (*'arkid*) that has come up". As bringers of good news they get, of course, suitable presents.

This is followed by other news brought in from various parts that *khaluas* (lakelets) have formed at So-and-So, and will last for so many days.

Last of all comes news that the *hubara* or lesser bustard have made their appearance. From the shaikh downwards, out go all lovers of the chase, and hundreds of birds are brought into the town and to the various Badawin encampments as food. They are assuredly an additional gift of God.

If rain falls in October, truffles and mushrooms, great delicacies to every Badawin, appear in the following spring, and form the staple food of the tent-dweller and his family for weeks on end. Truffles

A Dickson G-8 (1929-47) 1951 MI A Kuwait MI
Bedouins 1951

B
137

with *kubays* are verily, like the manna of old, Allah's reward to those who have endured the summer heat.

On the warm rains follow the new green shoots, and almost in a matter of hours, the yellow desert takes on a pale green hue. This rapidly develops till the advent of the December cold winds, when further growth is retarded until February and March. Then and only then does everything rush up into bloom, and flowers begin to cover the whole countryside. Nevertheless, the grass of October and November comes up sufficiently high to allow sheep to graze on it, though not without difficulty. This for the moment is all the Badawin *aks*.

WINTER

G
132
K
132

The period between the October rains and spring proper is known as *shita*, and lasts from about 15th November to the 15th of February. The cold now becomes intense, and the north-west winds cut to the marrow. Badawin men and women who can afford it go about in woollen top-boots. Similarly *farwahs* (fur-lined coats) are worn by the well-to-do from the shaikh downwards. The poor Badawin has a bad time, however, for his body, inured to the recent great heat of summer, can ill adjust itself to the biting cold. His threadbare summer cloak is all he has, and he therefore feels the cold even more than he did the heat.

To the European the cold of the Arabian winter and especially of the hinterland acts as a wonderful tonic. The desert air has a champagne effect about it, and nights in the desert are glorious experiences. As January draws nigh a series of frosts occur, usually about ten in number. At night the temperature in the hinterland drops to 29° F. and under, and water-skins freeze solid: an almost unbelievable change from the all too recent summer. If a north-west wind blows it can be very cold indeed on these frosty nights and nothing but an all-night fire will keep the sleeper alive.

I have visited the Karakoram and the Pamirs in my time, and have spent two winters at Gilgit, yet the cold of the Arabian desert seems to surpass anything I ever felt in those high altitudes. The explanation no doubt is that the Arabian summer saps a man's strength and leaves him ill prepared to fight such intense cold.

12: Theiger 7-3 (ca. 1949) 1950 MII Saudi Arabia
Bedouin M04

they must leave their rifles at a police post, but once they have climbed back on to the escarpment they are free to do as they like, subject only to the restraints of tribal life. Similarly, while they are inside the towns of Inner Oman, where the Imam has established law and order, they must behave themselves, but once they are outside the walls they can only be controlled by diplomacy and not by force, while everywhere in the Dhahirah of Northern Oman jealous and often hostile sheikhs vie with each other in the lavishness of their hospitality and the scale of their gifts to win the support of the Badu. There no sheikh can enforce his authority over the tribes, and none of them would try, lest by doing so he should alienate their support in time of need.

To understand the Badu character and way of life you must understand the land in which they live—a harsh, unforgiving land which conditions their lives so that they, too, are hard, hard in body and mind. They live in the desert—that is to say, in country which, judged by ordinary standards, is waterless. This applies equally to the barren, broken limestone mountains near the southern coast, to the flat, featureless gravel plains, and to the sands of the Empty Quarter itself, where the mountainous dunes, some of which are 700 feet high, run one behind the other for hundreds of miles. There are, of course, some wells in this desert, but they are usually few and far between: the Su'ar country has two permanent wells in it, Manwakh and Zamakh; the Manahil country has three or four. Thus in an area the size of Norfolk there might be two wells. I have myself twice travelled four hundred miles between wells. I admit that this is exceptional, but Badu have raided across these very stretches of desert, riding out and back again without touching at a well. You can think what this means when you realize that this distance is twice as far as from Dover to Edinburgh, and that these Arabs travelled at a speed of three miles per hour, relying only on the water which they could carry with them without foundering their camels, and that the camels themselves did not get a drink until they returned a month later.

It seldom rains in this desert; in many parts it has not rained for five years, and I have been in places where not a drop of rain has fallen for twenty-five years. By Badu standards a couple of hours' heavy rain in the year means a good year. They cannot, therefore, cultivate, but have to depend for their livelihood on their small herds of camels, and in quest of the pasturage which springs up after rain they travel great distances. Most of this vegetation is not green, but desert plants like the succulent yellow-flowering tribulus and heliotrope, and in the sands these plants will remain green after a few days' rain for as long as three and four years. But they do not last so long on the gravel plains and among the hills; in such places, however, grow scattered trees and bushes, such as the acacias, which afford valuable pasturage. Where there is rich grazing the Badu can remain for six and even nine months without water, for their camels get all the moisture they require from these green plants, and camels' milk suffices the Arabs themselves for food and drink. In the heat of summer the camels must be watered once a week, and if there is no well near the grazing on which they have wintered they must move back on to a permanent well and graze their herds as best they can on the